

Colombian Riverine Mobile Training Team

by Capt Steven L. Walsh

If the Marine Corps is to actively pursue further involvement in Latin America, then continued emphasis on how we train our mobile training teams is paramount.

As the predawn sky slowly began to clear, the figures could be made out moving silently through the jungle. The raid force had moved most of the night after having left their patrol craft at the river's edge. With an almost eerie silence, the narco camp began to awaken. Little did they know that watching silently were Colombian Marines, waiting for the right moment to strike. Once the raid commander determined that all the narcos were still in the camp, he gave the order to move in. Some awakened quickly and attempted to flee, but the escape routes were blocked. Before any could reach their weapons, all were captured. Not a single shot was fired, not a single man was injured. Only in the full light of day was it possible to see the full extent of the cocaine processing operation. Located in this one area was a 12-acre field of coca, several buildings to refine coca into pure cocaine, and a small living quarters. Over 15 kilos of refined HCL cocaine were located together with the leaves, paste, and chemicals to make another 200 kilos. After securing the narcos and searching the camp, the Marines moved on to yet another target location. Radioing the patrol boats to meet them at an extract point, they moved further up river. Leaping from the boats, they quickly moved inland and seized yet another lab. Explosives were later used to destroy the facilities. Reembarking on the boats, they returned to base under the cover of darkness.

The preceding paragraph describes the graduation operation conducted by an element of the Colombian Marine Corps (ColMar) Riverine Force earlier this year. They had just completed a grueling 25-day training program conducted by a joint U.S. Navy/U.S. Marine Corps mobile training team (MTT). The success they enjoyed then and continue to enjoy in counternarcotic/ counter guerrilla operations is a direct result of a unique and evolving U.S. Marine Corps commitment.

This article is intended to give the reader an update on the status of riverine operations as conducted by the ColMar and the involvement of the

U.S. Marine Corps in that effort. As the U.S. military involvement in Southwest Asia (SWA) diminishes, involvement in Latin America may well increase. It is worthwhile for all Marines to become familiar with how the ColMar and its riverine forces are organized and operate in this particular low-intensity conflict (LIC) as well as how the U.S. Marine Corps is involved.

The ColMar is much different in size and composition than our own. Consisting of approximately 7,000 men, it is organized into two brigades of three battalions each. Additionally, the ColMar has a special forces battalion and a security battalion, both under the direct control of the ColMar Headquarters. Without any tanks or aircraft, the ColMar is basically organized as a light infantry force.

Unlike our Corps, the ColMar is part of the Colombian Navy. Most officers are graduates of their naval academy and serve in a variety of commands during their careers. Generally, a lieutenant will spend three to four years with an operational unit before rotating to a nonoperational unit. It is not uncommon for a newly commissioned officer to be assigned to a special forces battalion (a unit with a force recon/SEAL-type mission) or as a platoon leader with a riverine unit. Given the current state of unrest in many parts of Colombia, most of the lieutenants see combat within their first year of service.

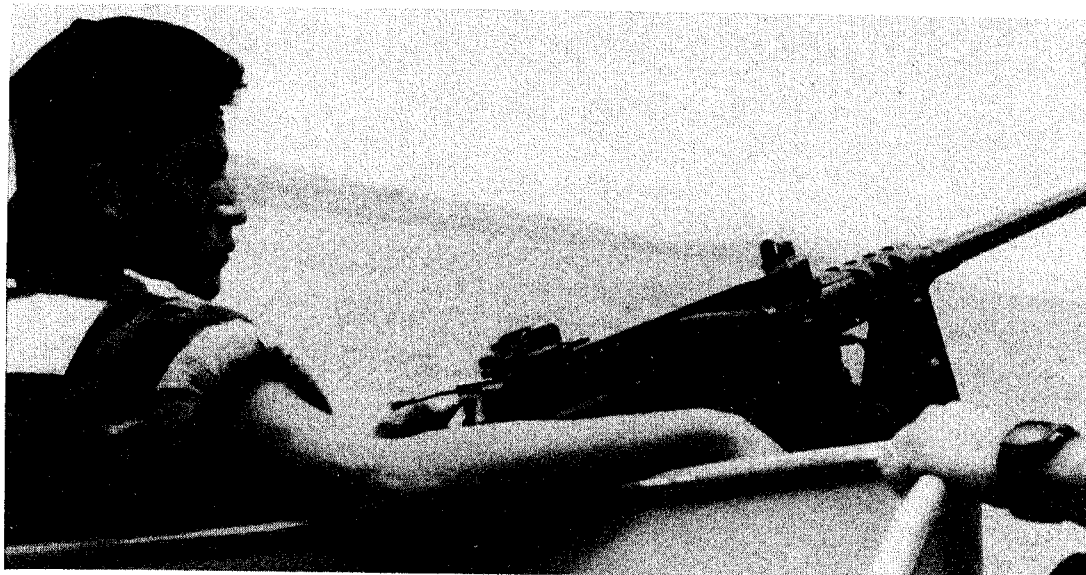
The enlisted ranks of the ColMar consist of 18-month draftees, 4-year volunteers, and a solid corps of professional noncommissioned officers (NCOs). After a three-month recruit training program, most of the Marines are posted directly to one of the eight operational battalions. As with the officers, most of the enlisted Marines see combat within their first year.

Extensive U.S. Marine Corps involvement with the ColMar began in March 1989 when the Commandant

issued his Latin American guidance and sponsorship message. One of the outgrowths of this message was more extensive involvement for the U.S. Marine lieutenant colonel currently assigned in the U.S. Military Group in Colombia as an advisor to the ColMar. The next step beginning in 1990 was the formation of a series of mobile training teams (MTTs) designed to teach primarily basic infantry skills training, recruit training, and small arms repair. These MTTs were located at the principal recruit depot in Covenas, a weapons repair facility in Cartagena, and at Puerto Leguizamo, an operational base on the Peruvian border. Each MTT remained in country about two months and was enthusiastically received by the Colombians. These teams and the locations where they operated represented a significant step forward in the relationship between our Corps. Previously, the major interface between the two Corps came only during the annual UNITAS exercises.

A natural progression from the basic skills taught by the first MTTs was a series of MTTs to instruct in riverine operations (see MCG, Apr91, p. 7). Although the ColMar already had a few 13-foot boats in some locations, it wasn't until the acquisition of 22-foot riverine patrol boats that they had a significant riverine capability. Purchase of the new boats from the Boston Whaler Company necessitated a series of MTTs to instruct in their use and how best to exploit their capabilities.

The revised ColMar riverine force is built around elements of three 22-foot boats and one 35-foot boat. The 22-foot boat, known as a "Piranha boat," is capable of transporting up to 10 combat troops with a 2-man crew. It is armed with an M2HB .50 caliber machinegun forward and with two M60 machineguns on each side. The 35-foot boat, not yet fielded, will be almost identical to our riverine assault craft (RAC), the major difference being that the Colombian boat will probably have a reduced electronics suite and more powerful engines. These elements will be supported by a support ship, similar to a tugboat with barge attached, which will have the capability to refuel and rearm the other boats. By the end of 1993 the ColMar is expected to have 15 combat riverine combat elements throughout the country. These elements will have the capability to control significant portions of



the more than 2,300 miles of Colombian rivers. In addition the ColMar now has the capability and training to project forces ashore for counternarcotic/counterguerrilla operations. Since many parts of Colombia are without roads, rivers serve as the principal means of commerce. This is also true of many other nations in Latin America. Having the ability to control rivers and the areas surrounding them is an important mission of the ColMar.

The first in a series of MTTs to instruct in riverine operations was formed in January 1991. Composition of the team consisted of Marines from Headquarters Marine Corps, the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Landing Force Training Command Atlantic (LFTCLant), the 2d Marine Division, and the 4th Marine Division. Navy team members came from Naval Special Warfare Unit 8 and Special Boat Unit 26, both located in Panama. Additionally, the team had two ColMar NCOs from riverine units.

All the team members were carefully chosen based upon previous experience with small boats, small unit operations, and language ability. After the team was formed it began an intensive seven-week predeployment training program. The training was conducted in a variety of locations and covered numerous skills that were required prior to deployment to Colombia. Without a proper predeployment training program, any MTT will be seriously handicapped in accomplishing its mission.

The first week of training was located at the Outboard Marine Corporation Training Center in Dallas, TX. Six of the team members learned outboard motor repair on the type of en-

gine installed on the Piranha boats. The engine was unique in its design because it incorporated several features reflecting the extremely spartan environment in which it would operate. After an intensive week of hands-on instruction, the team had an organic capability to perform and instruct up to 4th echelon maintenance. The next week of training was spent with Weapons Training Battalion at Quantico in the High Risk Personnel (HRP) Course. Instruction there concentrated on weapons handling and employment under realistic conditions. Additional material was provided by the staff of The Basic School on the M60 and M2HB machineguns, principal armament on the Piranha boats. Departing Quantico, the team next deployed to LFTCLant, Little Creek, VA, for three weeks of boat handling and riverine training. Under the instruction of the Tactical Training Branch, the team reviewed boat handling, riverine operations, boat repair, and a variety of related skills. The staff of LFTCLant had just completed training of the II MEF Riverine Assault Craft Platoon and were a logical choice to assist the MTT in this phase of training. Since the majority of the team had experience in small boats or riverine operations, much of the training received was of the refresher variety.

The MTT stayed at FTLCLant for an additional two weeks to receive medical and language training. Since the MTT would be operating in remote locations far from any medical facility, it was critical that all members receive additional first aid training. Some of the medical training consisted of cardiopulmonary resuscitation

(CPR), starting intravenous injections, treatment of gunshot wounds, and jungle diseases. Language refresher training was used to assist team members in developing lesson plans into Spanish. An instructor from the Defense Language Institute assisted in this phase of training.

Leaving LFTCLant, the MTT deployed to the Boston Whaler factory in Rockland, MA. The week spent at the factory consisted of additional instruction in boat and system repair. In addition, the MTT prepared the boats for shipment to Colombia.

The MTT departed on a cold March day via Marine VMGR-234 KC-130s from NAS South Weymouth, MA. The first stop was Panama for a day of SOUTHCOM briefings and the pickup of additional supplies. Departing for Colombia the next day, the team was ready and eager to begin its mission.

Arriving at the naval base at Puerto Leguizamo, the MTT quickly went to work. The training program developed for the ColMar reflected the mission statement of the MTT, which was to instruct in boat handling, riverine operations, and the projection of forces ashore. Designed especially for the new riverine combat elements, the training consisted of three phases. The first phase of the training was broken into two parts, one for the assault platoon and one for the boat crew. This training period was 10 days in length and covered a variety of individual skills, such as weapons handling and patrol techniques for the assault platoon and boat maintenance and handling for the boat crews. During phase two, the boat crews and embarked assault platoons commenced combined



A 22-foot Boston Whaler "Piranha boat," currently in use by the Colombian Marine Corps, glides across the water.

training, enabling both elements to function together as a team. Typically, the training day lasted from 0500 until 2100, six days a week. At times additional training was incorporated for certain key personnel such as corpsmen or mechanics. Beginning on training day 18 the riverine combat element commenced rehearsals for the actual operation that would serve as the graduation exercise.

Target information was obtained from a variety of sources available to the Colombian Navy and ColMar. Once a target was identified, a plan was developed for its seizure. Generally, the plan would involve a reconnaissance team inserted into the area to pinpoint the target site. Once the exact location of the lab was found, the main party of the raid force (usually the entire combat element—a platoon reinforced embarked in boats) would move out from the main base to a staging area. This movement was usually conducted at night to limit observation by the local civilians. After completing a series of false inserts, the force would disembark (usually at night) and move to an objective rally point with the use of a guide from the recon element. Meanwhile the assault craft would move to an interdiction site and prevent boat traffic from moving towards the target site. If required, the unit would establish a forward area refueling point to extend the range of the force.

At a designated time, usually just before dawn, the raid force moved on the target. Great care was taken to block escape routes from the site. Since the processing of cocaine requires a large quantity of precursor chemicals, many labs are located near a trail complex or a small stream. Consequently, all routes into and out

of the area needed to be covered. Once the raid force secured the target, evidence was seized and any personnel at the site were detained. Since the Colombian government permits the use of its military in many internal matters, some raids often resemble a police drug bust. Unfortunately, many of the guerrilla groups in Colombia have taken to guarding the drug labs, so the threat of combat action during any operation is a reality.

Whenever possible, as much of the refined drugs as possible is brought back to be used as evidence. The lab site and its contents are usually destroyed by explosives. Once the raid is complete the evidence and detainees are returned to the extract point. Reembarking on the boats, the raid force either returns to base or continues on to another target.

Seizure of narcotics labs is only one of the missions currently undertaken by the ColMar within its country. In many locations Marines are conducting counter guerrilla operations along a series of rivers throughout the country. Recently, a U.S.-trained ColMar platoon retook a village that had been seized by a guerrilla unit. Utilizing small boats, the platoon suppressed the guerrillas with machinegun fire from the boats while the remainder of the platoon landed and flanked the position. The Marines quickly routed the guerrillas and retook the village.

Other missions that the ColMar is currently conducting include security of naval bases, escort duty for commercial river traffic, and other special missions.

Future Operations

The U.S. Marine Corps has demonstrated by its various MTTs that it is committed to long-term assistance of

the ColMar. The riverine program will continue in Colombia, as will the deployment of MTTs to that country. Additionally, the U.S. Marine Corps will no doubt expand its involvement with other Latin American Marine Corps. These increases will be in addition to the already existing exercises that are now held annually.

All of this activity is not without a price. If our Corps is intent on continuing its involvement in Latin America, it must be willing to commit personnel to the task who possess the qualifications to ensure success. Not only do Marines serving in this environment need a high level of maturity and professional knowledge, but they must also be able to effectively instruct classes in Spanish. Failure to master the local language makes anyone operating with the host country ineffective. Increasing our throughput in various language training programs is the only way to ensure we have Marines capable of conducting MTTs. Relying, as we often have in the past, on the limited number of Marines who already have mastery of a foreign language will not suffice.

The Marine Corps, given its amphibious and expeditionary nature, is a natural choice to assist countries in Latin America in riverine operations. Without question, the Colombian riverine program and other U.S. Marine Corps involvement in the region will continue. The better prepared we are to participate in MTTs and other operations, the better we will be able to sustain the high quality performance already enjoyed.



>Capt Walsh is assigned to the Training Programs Division of the Marine Air-Ground Training and Education Center at Quantico. He served on an MTT early this year.